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FICTION

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ONE OF THOSE DAYS

Have you ever had one of those days? The type of day where it ends and you think "how did I go from where I was this morning to now. For me, this was today. It all began with me waking up. It was the deepest sleep I have had in months. We had just come back off a 2-day patrol. We got back to the base camp about nine at night so the Sargent said we could all get our heads down for the evening. Apparently, we had another special patrol in the morning. A special patrol was a code the Sargent used for Ambush.

Climbing out of my stretcher, I was careful not to hit my head on the roof of the tent. It was covered in condensation. When bumped it created a two-second shower and everything got wet. Quickly dressing into my fatigues, I scurried over to get some breakfast from the galley. There was always one thing you could constantly count on in the army and that was the standard of food. It was always crap. After forcing down my meal of powdered egg and something which looked like bacon but wasn't, the Sargent briefed us and off we went.

We were to set up an ambush about six kilometres from our base camp. The enemy had been probing our line looking for weaknesses and our ambush was to make them rethink their strategies. Quite often in jungle warfare one of the best weapons to use on your enemy is surprise and confusion. Our last few ambushes had gone very well. A high body count on their side and only a small wound from shrapnel on ours.

We reached the ambush site and set up shop. It was at a small bend in a track which we knew the enemy used frequently. We had been expecting an attack on the base camp for a few weeks but nothing so far. This meant that we might hit the jackpot. If a few enemy platoons were moving in

towards our base camp for an attack, they would most likely walk straight into our trap.

With everything set, we waited. One hour, two hours, three hours and then bingo. We first heard them talking. Given that they were six kilometres from our base camp, the enemy must have assumed that talking would be fine, at least for a few more kilometres. They were wrong, or so I thought. As they approached, one holy shit storm of lead poured down on those bastards. They fell like flies. We had rigged the track well with trip-wired grenades and as they took cover, from one side of the track to the other, they set them off. I guess looking back now, it all makes sense but at the time, it looked like a victory and an awesomely executed ambush. We all could not have been more wrong.

In our platoon, most of the guys were my mates. We all came from different parts of the country yet we had all been placed, for one reason or another, into this platoon. There were a few new guys which I didn't know yet but they seemed ok, just green. The parts of the battle that followed involved some of my mates getting knocked and then as I was reloading, my whole world went black.

I woke up on the floor of a truck with a thumping headache. I had been blindfolded and my hands had been tied behind my back. We must have been flanked by the enemy. We thought their numbers were fewer but given my predicament, we must have set up the ambush not realised that a whole enemy division, behind the platoon we ambushed, were making their way through the jungle to our assault our base camp. We weren't expecting any anything like the number of the enemy that surrounded us. By them simply springing our trap, we had inevitably trapped ourselves. We must have been quickly overrun. It would seem however for me; this was now irrelevant.

After about what seemed like an hour, the truck stopped. I am not sure where I was but I knew I had been taken well behind enemy lines. I assumed this because the truck had not stopped at any checkpoint and this must have meant that there was no need for it to be stopped. I was indeed, up the proverbial creek.

They dragged me out of the truck and I was walked into a room inside a small building. Sat in an old wooden seat, my blindfold was removed. There were two enemy officers in the room. They looked at me and then

spoke in their language, which I didn't understand. Then one spoke to me in English. He told me that I was now a prisoner of his imperial army and that the best thing for me was to answer all his questions truthfully to avoid any unpleasantness. Over the next two hours, he worked out I would not comply. I was hit and beaten as they repeatedly asked me their questions. How many soldiers are at our base camp? What was my Name? Where was my home? How many officer were at the base camp? How far away are the reinforcements? The questions just kept coming and my reply made them even angrier, a reply of silence.

They dragged me into another room and laid me down on a bench. They placed a cloth over my head and then came the water. We had been told about water-boarding in basic training but that seemed a little removed from actually having it done to you for real. Again with the questions. This time I spoke. "Could I please have a little more scotch and a little less water thank you. Who trained your barman, he's really not very good"? This made them furious but the water-boarding stopped. The only problem for me was that the beatings started again. After another hour they stopped. They left me there in that room for a while. I was alone. I was bleeding, bruised, battered and hungry. I think they had broken my arm and I could only see out of one eye.

A while later I could hear footsteps walking towards the door. This time it was a junior officer and a soldier. I looked up at them and noticed they wouldn't look me in the eye like the other officers and enemy soldiers had done. I found this disturbing and unsettling. They stood me up, tied my hands behind my back and asked me if I wanted a blindfold, in really broken English. Declining their offer, they walked me out to the courtyard and then it hit me, I was being taken to my execution.

As they walked me over to a corner of the courtyard, I thought of the slumber I had awoken from earlier that morning. The smell of the galley food as I ate my breakfast. The sound of the cordite which was apparent during the ambush. The taste of blood in my mouth from the last several hours of beatings.

As I was knelt down in the corner of the courtyard, I could hear the unclasping of the officer's pistol holster and the actioning of his 8mm Nambu Pistol

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CASEY

The path led through the abandoned carnival. I had followed the man now for almost three miles. “he was the one” I said to myself.

It was almost six years now since I lost my little girl. We lived about 12 kilometres from a small town in central Victoria called Elmore. It was a quite town or so I thought. One day as little Casey was walking home, after getting off the school bus at the stop near our road, a car pulled up. I was at work when I got the call, from my wife to say she was missing. I felt this knot in the pit of my stomach. “Have you called the school” I asked. She had, she had phoned all of our friends who had kids at the same school. The police worked out from talking to everyone that she must have caught the bus home as she had done a hundred times before and then this bastard had picked her up. All they found were her headphones at the side of the road. She must have dropped them as he dragged her into the car.

After this our lives were changed forever. From a close loving family, our little Casey taken, my marriage broke down. We had moved to Melbourne to try and salvage our relationship but that didn’t work. Now alone, without my family, I only have one thing on my mind, to make my daughters murderer pay no matter what it cost me and let’s face it, I had nothing to lose.

The years went by and four years after little Casey was taken the police called me. They had arrested a man which they believed was the one. Apparently, they had been watching him for a while and when they raided his house in a completely unrelated event, they found my little girls school bag and her clothes stained with her blood. He confessed and was sentenced to 8 years. Imagine my surprise when he was released after 6 for good behaviour.

Realising my plan for revenge, I worked out that I would need some tools. I joined a local gun club became very proficient with a pistol and had my own weapon, ammunition and all that I would need to carry out my task.

Nothing had improved in my life and my now ex-wife had moved overseas. I guess it was her way of trying to forget. I had started to drink when Casey wasn't found, and I hadn't stopped. I had also started smoking and found that gave my idol shaking hands something to do.

The abandoned carnival was the perfect place for me. It was quite and I knew this scum, who had taken my daughter often walked through the park on his way home but tonight he wouldn't make it, or so I thought.

He had stopped at the carousel and just stood there. I was not sure why. It appeared like he was looking at something. I wasn't sure. Anyway, that didn't bother me. I removed the Glock 9mm from my pocket. I had worn soft sole shoes, so he didn't even hear me behind him. My handgun was just 30 centimetres from the back of his head when I pulled the trigger. The blood sprayed over the carousel horse in front of him and as the spent casing from my gun made a clinking noise as it hit the concrete path, we were both standing on, the man fell to his knees dead.

As the blood pooled, I could feel the adrenalin racing the through my body. As I looked up, I could see another man, standing on the other side of the carousel. He looked just like the man I had just taken my revenge on. How could that be? If the man on the other side of the carousel was the one who took my Casey and in doing so destroyed my life, who was the man I had shot. It was then as the man spoke to me that I realised I had made a terrible mistake. The man said "I was the one you were after; you have just killed my twin brother. With that I raised my gun again and the real culprit fell.

I walked towards him and at last I was standing over the now dead man, the one who had taken so much from me. He had destroyed my happy family, destroyed our lives, destroyed my little girl and made me into a husk of a man. Now standing over this pathetic excuse of a human, I realised the irony. That by him taking Casey, he had set off a chain of events to which no one could have foreseen. As I stood over this man watching the blood pool around him as it had done with his brother, I realised that it was my job to now break the chain.

I slid back the slide on my gun, just enough to see that there was still a round chambered. I walked over to a park bench nearby and sat down. With tears rolling down my face, I looked up. Seeing the bright blue sky through the trees

I slowly walked over to a nearby park bench and sat down. As tears rolled down my face, I looked up. Watching the blue sky showing through the trees which canopied the area, the slightest pressure from my index finger, and it was all over, or so I thought. After a short while I could hear Casey's voice. "hello Dad, I missed you" and with that I was reunited with my daughter. The little girl, who at fourteen was taken away from me. The little girl who I had held in my arms as a baby. The little girl who sang me jingle bells in her kindergarten Christmas play. The little girl who lit up my life and was my reason for getting up in the morning. Her death separated us and broke my heart into a million pieces. Now, mine had put my heart back together because we were finally a family again. "Yes sweetheart, I missed you too".

BROKEN

With her eyes welling up as I looked at her sad face, I could see her heart breaking. The news was devastating for us. I wanted to comfort her with a hug or some affection, but she wouldn't have any of that. An affair is one of those things that broke a relationship, I thought to myself. Tore down to its bare skeletal structure and exposed it for what it had been and now, sadly, for what it had become.

An affair was a strange relationship, I thought to myself, as I tried to make sense of the situation. One moment you're in a fantastic relationship and the very next moment something changes. Something you like but now appears missing in your partner. You start looking for it again, but it isn't there. Next thing you know, you find it in someone else and with a wink, a smile or a glint in their eye, it starts. That new person fills the void and offers you that new excitement you no longer feel in your current relationship. That's how it starts.

"We could forget what's happened and just make like it never happened" I pleaded with her. How was it possible to love someone so much but also feel love for someone else at the same time? To devote yourself to someone and want to spend the rest of your life with them but then in what seems like another life, have a relationship with another person is such a similar but unfamiliar way. I guess it is possible because it has just happened.

With the warmth of love for your partner in one life and the excitement of an affair in another life, this was how it was, life one and life two.

Life One

Lying next to each other, I wake first. Looking down at the way the sheets lay on her body, showing those curves that highlight beneath the sheets, her beautiful, perfect body. Her silk like hair is laying on the

pillow as she sleeps. I can hear her breathing ever so quietly. Quietly enough so that she does not disturb her surroundings. Quietly enough so that the sheets raise and lower with every breath she takes.

I leave the room and shower, and as I walk into the kitchen for breakfast before work, she is drinking a glass of orange juice near the kitchen bench, as I sit down. There is nothing this woman does from sleeping to drinking orange juice; that doesn't make me admire her on many levels. She is to me perfect, and no matter what happens in life two, she always will be.

Once we have taken the train to work, we part at the station. I go downtown to my office in a high-rise and commence my day. She works uptown as an IT specialist for one of the largest companies in the country. Sometimes if we both can make it, we have lunch together. More recently, this has become the exception rather than the rule. I suspect the reason is that of life two, but that is to be expected.

Our working day ended, we would meet up and catch the train home together. But of course, this was dependent on two things. Either of us doesn't have to work back late and sometimes life two came into play.

We were quite active people, and we were always walking our dog Chipper, joining a fun run or going out of town to one of the many national parks for a day trip. We loved climbing the small cliff edges or walking along the many mountain trails and recently we had started mountain bike riding. Her idea, but I soon learnt to love it. "change is as good as a holiday", she would remind me. Going from walking the dog to mountain bike riding was a change of pace. I guess in a way; life two was a change as well.

The biggest change in my life, until now, was the day we were married. I had stood at the altar with her, and we both said our vows. I remember them well and from time to time when I would look at another woman with their curves and cute smiles directed towards me, I would have to catch myself and the guilt of that moment would play on me for a few short minutes while I remembered my wife. "How could I think this way when I am happily married", I would say to myself, and oops, back to reality I would land and feel happy with my life. So what are vows? Just words we say at the time, which we mean at the time but like all things

we expect, say or do, time passes and as I have learnt through this ordeal, so apparently do our words.

If I could just get her to understand, to forget the affair ever happened. The glimpse, the flirting and then the love affair. If I could just get her to forget it and put it all behind us, then we might have one last chance at happiness. One last chance of me waking up next to her knowing that she was the most important thing in my life. She was my life but convincing her of that would take time. For now, I would just have to be there, be there and suffer the pain of watching her eyes welling up as I looked at her sad face, I could see her heart breaking as I pleaded with her to forget it ever happened.

Life Two

With the pretence of working back late, the affair would start at a hotel on the other side of town. The room rates were cheap, so not to be noticed as a small charge on our bank statement. Well I looked at our bank account, and the hotel charges were all mixed up with the direct debits and fund transfers, so very cleverly, not noticed.

An affair is not like in the movies as I had thought. It was sneaky and underhanded. Keeping the third party completely oblivious and thinking everything was as routine as the previous day and then the day that followed. While normality pursued, the apparent gaps were the times when the two lovers met and go most importantly, unobserved. If done with just the right amount of deceit, the cunning of a rat and the timing of relative at a will reading, the affair could be and was undetected, until now.

Meeting with her at the hotel was like a sort of collaboration of deceit. Both parties knew it was wrong, but in support of each other, the affair carried on regardless. Without the concern for the pain caused by even the slightest revelation of the affair, it carried on for almost two years. Meeting at the hotel, meeting in a park nobody we knew visited, the business trips away; they were all key to the success of the affair. Until now these seemingly innocently portrayed absences were afforded way too much trust when compared to what had happened.

Standing in the hotel room, unzipping her dress and watching as it slipped down her almost perfect body, to the floor. Embracing her and falling onto the bed and being enthralled in the passion of the affair.

With the lie of the "business trip", lying next to her after making love and then falling asleep together in each other's arms. In the morning, waking up next to her and looking down at the way the sheets lay on her body, showing those curves that highlight beneath the sheets, her beautiful, perfect body. Her silk like hair laying on the pillow as she sleeps, watching her breath ever so quietly. Quietly enough so that she does not disturb her surroundings. Quietly enough so that the sheets raise and lower with every breath she takes.

Returning home, the next night after the "business trip", as if nothing untoward had ever happened. No broken trust, no broken vows, no played out deceit. There was nothing but normality, yet it was all a lie. A lie, however, I could live with easily. A lie that we could have easily never told another sole. A secret lie. Our secret lie.

With her eyes welling up as I looked at her sad face. She started to cry as she looked back at me and said, "I should have never betrayed you, I love you, please please forgive me".

ESPRESSO ROOM CAFÉ

13 December 2018

I am sitting in a café watching, people watching. Opposite me there are a couple. He is a good-looking man of African origins and she is a beautiful girl of European backgrounds. They are sitting talking and they are or about to fall in love. He is talking with confidence and sincerity. She is listening to his every word, but her body language is giving her away. She has her arms close to her body in the same way a child snuggles into their favourite blanket. She likes him so much but is trying to hide it. Not doing a good job of it. She is totally smitten with him and her focus is on his every expression and word. I think they will shortly be in a relationship if they aren't already. They are getting ready to move on and she realises this and moves her arm across the table to touch his arm. He smiles and tries to hide his happiness but not very well. They both now realise that they are into each other and have become more relaxed. There is definitely some sort of amorous tension between them and you can see if you look, what is on both their minds. Its beautiful to watch. He has made the move and places his hands in the middle of the table meeting her half way. All she has to do is touch his hand and the proverbial ice will be broken. She moves her hands close to his. I think she wants him to make the first move, but he doesn't read the signs and the moment passes. Is he the guy that wants to say you started it, is he playing games with her? She has moved her hands off the table and shows him that if he wants to show her how he feels she can only reciprocate if he makes the first move. This two and throw goes on for a while and he sips his glass of water. She leans forward and puts her whole self-leaning on the table. The tension grows again. His hand is again in the middle of the table. They both want to be more, but neither is willing to make the

first move making only subtle gestures to entice the other but without any results. Their game goes on for a while, He leans across the table and touches her arm. They are so close to making a move now but the lines of who will and who won't make it are blurred. It looks as if they are so keen to evolve their friendship into something else but are afraid that if they read each other wrong then it will be turned into a loss and rejection. Her body language is so obviously wanting this, but she just can't risk his rejection. I think he either needs to step up or back off. In the cat and mouse game they are in requires them to work out who the cat is and who the mouse is. The stand to walk away and he sees his opportunity slipping away. As they leave the table, he notices he hand by her side and he touches her ever so gently and she responds. Her heart beats faster and faster in anticipation of what their relationship has now just newly shifted to. She smiles such a smile that if you look you can see he overwhelmed happiness. He is also smiling, knowing that because she tightens her hand on his, he has started something that is welcomed. As they leave the table in the cafe opposite where I am sitting, I can tell that this is the end of their friendship as friends and the start of their relationship as friends still but also lovers.

About the author

William Dirk Mayberry is an Australian writer and independent digital publisher based in West Java, Indonesia. Writing across fiction, memoir, essays, educational works, self-help, and reflective nonfiction, his work explores memory, resilience, observation, and everyday human experience through a direct and personal style. His interest in storytelling began during his service in the Royal Australian Navy and later developed into a growing catalogue of independently published digital works released under the Java Free Press imprint. His publications include memoirs such as The Longest Way Home, children's stories from the Bag Chip Bird series, practical educational titles from the 101 Self Help collection, and speculative fiction projects including the Crononaught Collection. Influenced by writers such as Robert Louis Stevenson, his work combines realism, introspection, and accessible storytelling across a range of genres and formats.

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